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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the video-letter and defines it as a message transmitted via the video from one party to another in order to convey visually the immediate linguistic and cultural presence of the transmitter to the receiver. The idea for producing the video-letter arose out of a workshop on video correspondence conducted in France under the auspices of the French Government and the American Association of Teachers of French. During the course of that workshop, 15 American teachers and administrators spent 1 week discussing the pedagogical rationale for producing the video-letter. In the fall of 1990, the Intermediate French class of Marymount University, Arlington (Virginia), produced a video-letter addressing a French class from Australia with a similar student population. The video-letter production was structured in such a way that students who performed actively before the camera had an opportunity to use many of the language skills they had studied previously in class. The problematics of a video-letter production in the classroom are clear. First, it is difficult to evaluate the performance of students who participate in this kind of video activity. Furthermore, it is a very time-consuming project. Yet, for the class at Marymount University, the video-letter production was mainly a positive experience: (1) the Marymount class developed a real "espirt de coprs" while working on the language skills project; (2) students prepared their "exposes" better than they had in the past because they knew these projects would be taped and that students from Australia would be viewing the tape; and (3) each student did improve certain oral skills. The video camera is both an eye and an ear which, when used intelligently and with imagination, can be a valuable vehicle for stimulating and improving the communication skills of foreign language students. (VWL)

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STRATEGIES FOR PRODUCING A VIDEO-LETTER IN THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

In this article, video-letter will be defined as a message transmitted via the video from one party to another in order to convey visually the immediate linguistic and cultural presence of the transmitter to the receiver. The idea for producing a video-letter arose out of a workshop on video correspondence conducted in France under the auspices of the French Government and the American Association of Teachers of French. During the course of that workshop, fifteen American teachers and administrators spent one week discussing the pedagogical rationale for producing the video-letter.

In the Fall of 1990, the Intermediate French class of Marymount University, Arlington VA, produced a video-letter addressing a French class from Australia with a similar student population. The video-letter production was structured in such a way that students who performed actively before the camera had an opportunity to use many of the language skills they had studied previously in class. Moreover, while working on a video correspondence, the students were quite motivated to communicate in French with peers from another country. Abdallah-Precelle (1991: 96) discusses this awareness of the *other*: "Rencontre avec l'Autre, mais aussi rencontre avec Soi, l'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère n'est pas un savoir neutre, il interroge directement l'individu dans sa singularité personnelle et collective." Thus the video-letter became more than a cultural exchange; it was a linguistic challenge including elements of dialogue, components of an oral presentation, and strategies for improving communicative competence. Furthermore, the video-letter also conveyed feelings related to the target language and brought a new dimension of communication to the foreign language classroom.

The problematics a video-letter production in the classroom are clear. First, it is difficult to evaluate the performance of students who participate in this kind of video activity. Furthermore, it is a very time-consuming project. Finally, the teacher and the student must deal with what Phillips has referred to as both "debilitating" and "facilitating" anxiety. Students who are normally at ease, sometimes freeze before a camera. Yet, for the class at Marymount University, the video-letter production was mainly a positive experience: 1) The Marymount class developed a real *esprit de corps* while working on a language skills project; 2) Students prepared their *exposés* better than they had in the past because they knew these projects would be taped and that students from Australia would be viewing the tape; 3) Each student did improve certain oral skills.

The production of a video-letter is not only a rich cultural exchange, it is also an innovative way of helping high school and college students to develop the confidence they need in order to improve their oral proficiency. Indeed, the video camera is both an eye and an ear which, when used intelligently and with imagination, can be a valuable vehicle for stimulating and improving the communication skills of foreign language students.

In recent years, the video camera has been used to produce foreign language programs whose goals are to improve the receptive skills of students or to introduce authentic materials into the foreign language curriculum. Programs such as *French in Action, France TV Magazine, Spanish TV Magazine, Espana Viva, México Vivo, Deutsch Direkt, Actualités Videos*, to name but a few, are now used commonly in the foreign-language classroom. Herron (1991:488) and Tomasello suggest that students who had viewed *French in Action* during the course of the semester "demonstrated considerably greater listening comprehension than students for whom the video program had not been part of the semester's curriculum." Crouse and Noll (1980:39) point out that "videotape has the advantage of allowing for a more complete communicative process, including gestures, facial expressions, and body movements..." *In The Video Connection,* Altman

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(1989:19) concludes that "the amount o information carried by video makes it an especially rich cultural vehicle."

More recently, foreign language instructors have actually begun to experiment with video productions themselves by encouraging student participation in various video activities. At the *Centre Censier, Université de Paris III*, Moliné and Le Coadic actively promote the use of the video camera in their French language workshops. Foreign language teachers in the United States have also begun to produce video-letters and to film student activities or to ask students to film such activities in order to promote a cultural exchange with students from other countries. However, this is but one reason for initiating a video correspondence.

In this article, video-letter will be defined as a message transmitted via the video from one party to another in order to convey visually the immediate linguistic and cultural presence of the transmitter (*destinateur*) to the receiver (*destinataire*). The idea for producing a video-letter arose out of a workshop on video correspondence conducted in France under the auspices of the French Government and the American Association of Teachers of French. During the course of that workshop, fifteen American teachers and administrators spent one week discussing the pedagogical rationale for producing the video-letter. Although my conception of a video-letter was somewhat different from that of our *animatrice*, this activity certainly seemed to be one way of motivating my Intermediate French class at Marymount University. This class is a heterogeneous one comprised of both American and international students, usually ranging in age from 17 to 23. Some of the international students have traveled in France and therefore have had an opportunity to use elementary level oral French in real life situations. The American students have either studied Introductory French at Marymount or are students who have had two or three years of high school French.

Upon learning that a French professor at the University of New South Wales in Australia was seeking video correspondents for a class with a similar population, we concluded that the project became even more appealing. Professor Battistini's class responded by sending not only one video-letter but also a second video as a response to certain comments Marymount students had made in their video correspondence. A list of such correspondents is often available in *Le Français dans le Monde or La Gazette Réseau Vidéo-Correspondence.*[1]

Initiating this video project also seemed like a good idea because my class at Marymount University was relatively enthusiastic about the project. Having taught a foreign language for many years, I realized that an eclectic approach to language pedagogy gives students with diverse linguistic talents several opportunities to use those talents. Trayer (1991:424-425) suggests that successful language learners like to communicate and that those students who are feeling-oriented' may be able "to benefit from communicating with others more than from more formal language analysis." Trayer refers specifically to gifted students, but based on my experience with the video-letter production, it was clear that the same point can be made with regard to weaker students. Finally, the decision to go forward with this project was influenced by an important practical consideration. Our class had access to an editing machine at Marymount's Instructional Media Center.[2] It is true that the teacher and students can do the filming themselves. It is preferable to use an editing machine after filming, however, since students often ramble on without thinking about time constraints. With some good editing, one can also incorporate pictures and music into the video-letter.

Another advantage of the video-letter format is that students who see and hear themselves perform on film, often "catch" their own errors and are thus given an opportunity to improve their oral proficiency. Berwald (1970:926) points out that there is also the possibility for peer correction. Indeed, if one of the goals of the foreign language instructor is to improve communicative competence (*ACTFL* 1986), the video-letter production should be structured in such a way that students who perform actively before the camera have an opportunity to use many of the language skills they have studied previously in class. Moreover, while working on a video correspondence, the students know they are addressing their remarks to a specific person or group of persons and are often motivated to perform at optimum level to communicate with peers from another country. In order to best motivate students, the teacher must be sure of having a receiver (*destinataire*). Abdallah-Precelle (1991:96) discusses this cultural awareness of the *other*:

> *Rencontre avec l'Autre, mais aussi rencontre avec Soi, l'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère n'est pas un savoir neutre, il interroge directement l'individu dans sa singularité personnelle et collective.*

The *rencontre avec l'autre* certainly proved to be a motivating factor for both classes which are described in this article. As Crouse and Noll point out (1980:391): ' Students want to do their best when they know their work is being recorded, to be seen not only by the teacher but by their peers as well." In fact, Battistini reports that upon viewing the video-letter sent from Marymount, her students decided to produce a second video independently (p.c.). In this video-response, five Marymount students are addressed individually. For example, one Australian correspondent explains why he prefers abstract art to French Impressionism (three Marymount students had discussed the techniques of Renoir and Monet). Another Australian peer claims to be less interested in politics than one of his American counterparts. This dialogue is conducted entirely in French and thus the video correspondence becomes more than a cultural exchange; it is a linguistic challenge which includes elements of dialogue, components of an oral presentation, and strategies for improving communicative competence. Furthermore, the video-letter also conveys feelings related to the target language and thus adds a new dimension of communication to the foreign language classroom.

Still, the problematics of initiating a video-letter production in the classroom are clear. For one thing, it is very difficult to evaluate the performance of students who participate in this kind of video activity. Students who are normally at ease, sometimes freeze before a camera. Other students who do not usually participate, perform very well before the camera and are suddenly in their element. This actually happened to one of my weaker students. In her article on "Anxiety and Oral Competence," Phillips presents this well-known classroom dilemma. Phillips (1991:1) points out that

> for students suffering from foreign language classroom anxiety, today's proficiency-oriented classroom may further exacerbate their apprehension.

At times, this problem is compounded during the production of a video-letter. However, Phillips (1991:2) also cites studies which reveal "no correlation between anxiety and achievement in language learning." Furthermore, she quite rightly refers to the distinction between "facilitating" and "debilitating" anxiety. Based on my experience, any anxiety felt by my students during the video-letter production was of a "facilitating" nature. In other words, even though

some students did have "butterflies" during the filming, their communicative competence was not hindered by this effort

The Marymount students also knew that they would not be evaluated solely on their video production. In fact, the video-letter grade only counted 25% of the total grade. Furthermore, it was made clear at the outset that the evaluation of each student would be based on effort as well as on performance. Before recording, all students were required to give oral exposés on some aspect of French culture. These reports were first evaluated in the classroom based on research, effort, presentation, and oral proficiency. Since everyone had already been evaluated in the classroom situation, students did not have to be overly concerned about a grade. The exposé was also a way of introducing the cultural component into our language study. The exposés included such topics as the French Political System, Impressionist Painting, the *Tour de France,* Gérard Depardieu, and Coco Chanel.

Another problem is that the production of a video-letter is a time-consuming project. Consideration must be given to the amount of time the teacher and students have in order to fit the production of the video-letter into a foreign language program. At Marymount, the decision was made to go ahead because the class was small and the project manageable. If the production of a video-letter is really going to help students with their language skills, one must have a small class or work with a small group within a larger class. Moreover, since the class was an unusually diverse group comprised of both American and international students, the production of a video-letter was a good way of "bringing us together" as well as an innovative means of improving the oral proficiency skills of all my students. In a way, the production of a video-letter is particularly valuable if a teacher has a heterogeneous class. Such a diverse group is often difficult to teach because students have varying degrees of oral proficiency. A language skills activity gives a focus to the language program and students tend to feel less inhibited about speaking.

Therefore, in the Fall of 1990, the Intermediate French class of Marymount University produced a video-letter addressing an Intermediate French class from Australia. In their syllabus, the students were informed that greater emphasis would be placed on oral proficiency and on the cultural component of language learning than on other skills. Grammar study and written work were reserved for the first part of the week. Thursdays were devoted to the video-letter and eventually, students were asked to give up personal time for some of the filming. The foreign language teacher must also expect to contribute personal time to this type of project. As mentioned earlier, this is one of the drawbacks of a video-letter production; it is a very time-consuming project. Yet the advantages do outweigh the disadvantages. For our particular class, there were three main advantages: 1) The Marymount class developed a real *esprit de corps* because everyone was working on a language skills project; 2) Students prepared their *exposés* better than they have in the past because they knew these projects would be taped and that students from Australia would be viewing the tape; 3) Each student did improve certain oral skills. After viewing the letter, students could "pick up" on repeated non-standard forms. For example, one young man who speaks quite fluently for this level, was in the habit of saying *je vas*. After recognizing this form himself during our "play-back," he corrected himself and subsequently used the standard form. Another young lady whose oral skills are quite good, often used the third person plural of the verb *être* with the singular subject. When she first introduces herself, she makes this error in the video. However, after hearing herself speak, she corrected the

error while giving her *exposé on* Gérard Depardieu. Still another student continued saying *cuisine français* instead of *cuisine française*. For the final viewing, she, too, corrected herself. These were small but significant steps in the language learning process.

The final viewing is mentioned because there were trial runs. According the strategies for a video-letter as they were spelled out in our workshop at the *Centre Censier, Université de Paris III,* the students were supposed to perform in a spontaneous way. Ideally, when conveying the "message" between *destinateur (émetteur)* and *destinataire (récepteur)* students should not be inhibited as they "play" their role. Indeed, in the video correspondence which we received from the class in Australia, spontaneity was encouraged and seemed to be of paramount importance.[3] This spontaneous interaction does add a certain charm to the video-letter. Yet, the Australian students who did opt for total spontaneity often used non-standard forms. At this level, one expects students to have errors in speech. However, these were errors related to grammatical points which are usually mastered by French students at the intermediate level. This is where bridging the gap between theory and practice came into play. The totally spontaneous approach just did not work as well for us. It was important to encourage communicative competence, but students cannot be given unstructured exercises at the intermediate level. Consequently, the students were reminded that they should consider certain questions before the filming and were asked to keep in mind the concept of "correct French" they had learned while trying not to be inhibited about speaking. In other words, the pressure was certainly **not** on to speak absolutely correct French; this was, after all, an Intermediate French class. However, the students did **know** that they were expected to use *depuis* plus the present tense, to use the verb *avoir* when stating their age, and to keep in mind other idiomatic expressions. Ideally, during the video-letter production the teacher should encourage both communicative competence and correctness. For instance, before working on the video-letter, we had studied many grammatical structures extensively, to the point where they had become almost automatic responses. What better way to try using these structures than by transmitting information to one's peers via the video-letter and thus relate language study to a real-life situation.

This is how we proceeded. At the beginning of the video, the students introduced themselves, stating how long they have studied French and what they were studying at Marymount. Most students decided to discuss their favorite activities and others did not. For the sake of variety, some students were interviewed and asked specific questions, while others introduced themselves directly. This is where most of the impromptu conversation took place. After a brief musical interval, each student gave an *exposé* on some aspect of French culture or civilization. This part of the video was more structured. Those students who were more confident in front of a camera did not need to rely on *voix-off*. The technique of *voix-off* is used most often in theatrical productions when someone must present a long text without having much time to prepare it. The text is narrated with expression, but off stage. Similarly, for a video-letter production, students who are more "camera shy" can use notecards to read sections of their exposé, while pictures which are directly related to their topic are projected on the screen. In my class, the more confident students presented their exposé on camera without notes. Some students even began to "ad-lib" while being filmed. Such an impromptu use of the target language should not be discouraged, for it often adds humor to the video correspondence. Clearly, while working on this type of project, it is important to keep a sense of humor. One should not forget that despite unexpected frustrations which can occur when attempting such a new approach to language study, the video-letter production should be an enjoyable learning experience.

While we were working on our video correspondence, most of my students felt relaxed about using the target language. Of course, one of the many surprises for the language teacher is to see heretofore confident students, and sometimes the best students, suddenly feel "camera-shy." In our production, this was mainly what I referred to earlier as "facilitating" anxiety. After videotaping miniplays of his class, Keilstrup (1980:369) reported a similar type of anxiety felt by some of his students. However, he finally concluded that the videotaping was a positive experience despite initial feelings of nervousness:

> The pressure and resulting anxiety and hesitancy experienced by many students during videotaping spontaneous conversations and situation-oriented miniplays can be included among the negative aspects of using the VTR. But after the first taping, students became more relaxed and even prefer taping their performance to performing live in front of the entire class.

Moreover, the sensitive teacher will always make allowances for students whose written and grammar skills are stronger than their oral skills. Certainly, it is those students interested in oral communication who will excel while working on the production of a video-letter. This is why no one should ever be "forced" to participate in a video project.

Given the technological advances of today, many educators believe that the time will come when the majority of students will feel comfortable in front of the video camera. Perhaps the production of a video-letter could also become one more way of helping high school and college students to develop the confidence they need to perform better when taking proficiency tests which assess their oral and receptive skills. Altman (1989:103) reminds us that in Latin the word video means "I see" and the word audeo means "I hear." Indeed, the video camera is both an eye and an ear which, when used intelligently and with imagination, can be a valuable vehicle for stimulating and improving the communication skills of foreign language students.

Endnotes

1 In the centerfold of *Le Français dans le Monde*, one can find the addresses of high school teachers and university professors worldwide who are interested in exchanging video-letters. *La Gazette RVC* is a publication of CIEP-Belc 9, rue Lhomond, Paris 75005.

2 At Marymount University, teachers who wish to use technological aids are fortunate to have an experienced professional staff at the Instructional Media Center. I would like to thank, in particular, Irene Upshur and Jerry Slezak for their help and advice

3 I received two letters from Professor Battistini who teaches French at the University of New South Wales in Australia. She makes it quite clear that she wanted her video-letter production to be a very spontaneous linguistic and pedagogical experiment.

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